

Preventing Terrorism among Ghanaian Muslim Youth: Realities and Challenges

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Abstract

Although extremism is an old phenomenon, the pursuit to find measures to combat it reached an upsurge after the major attacks in many European countries and America, leading many countries and the international community to take severe measures to prevent this menace. Over the past couple of decades, Ghana has won a hard-earned reputation as a stable and settled product of democracy. Despite these efforts, the African continent is plagued in recent times with Muslim radicals and terrorists' activities from some militant groups such as the AQIM, Boko Haram, Ansar Dine and MUJAO. While Ghana has been far from being victims of any such attacks and consequently recorded no valid cases about Ghanaian Muslim youth involvement in such acts; Ghana's location in the West African region renders the country's youth more vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. This concept paper therefore assesses the possibility of Ghana's Muslim youth becoming a target of terrorist recruitment and possibly launching attacks or serving some major terrorist group across the region. It also examines some of the challenges faced by Muslim religious leaders in fighting against extremism and radicalization. Analyses of secondary data revealed that, there are no Muslims terrorist cells currently operating in Ghana. However, certain conditions prevailing in the country heighten the possibility of becoming a target of terrorism or a safe haven for terrorist groups. The analyses further proved that, Ghana has put in place measures such as legislations and institutions to ensure that any terrorist attempt at the country is averted. The paper finally offered some recommendations for policy consideration which include among others, granting a semi-autonomous status to some local Islamic organizations to work hand-in-hand with governmental institutions to alleviate any threats from Ghanaian Muslim youth extremists.

Keywords: Extremism, Muslim youth, Terrorist recruitment, Muslim religious leaders, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Ghanaian Muslims and people around the world worry about rising extremism, whether perceived or real. Any responsible Muslim youth who is focused in achieving a better future will never want to become part of any militant group at all in life. Boko Haram, AQIM and ISIS are the world's most violent insurgent groups that pose threat to the Ghanaian Muslim youth.

Ghana has a very good reputation for being comparatively peaceful and stable country in an unstable region. Violent extremism and religious radicalization have significantly impacted other countries in the West African states, especially in light of the conflict in Mali, Niger, Libya and the increase terrorist violence in northern Nigeria. Ghana's relative stability has meant that it has attracted less attention than its neighbors in international and regional security debates. (Loada & Romaniuk, 2014)

Terrorism has become a major threat to youth development in the world-over; it remains one of the most continuing challenges to international peace and security in the twenty-first century. Terrorism- according to scholars- is becoming more complex. In the West African region, the militant group Boko Haram has been causing havoc in the northern part of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroun and Chad by recruiting many Muslim youth. These youth are being trained to fight the

central government and target innocent people who do not share the same ideology with the militant group. The youth are being convinced that their fight for the group is in defense of Islam (Muggah, 2016).

It is believed that terrorist groups have thousands of members and followers which majority constitute Muslim youth. Alfred (2016) believes that those Muslim youth under the terrorist groups play different roles loyally to the group. Many of them have been recruited to be fighters while others play supportive roles by engaging in drug smuggling and logistics.

BACKGROUND

Ghanaian Muslim Youth are the vertebrae of the Muslim society in the country, both its young and old. They are a major component of the society. If they are guided rightly in the beginning, they are the ones who determine what the future of Islam would be in Ghana. This is because majority of projects and programs are done by youth, and have changed the world through education, writing and working revolutionaries. They changed the world both good and bad (Ibrahim, 2010).

The news of the young Ghanaian Muslim (Nazir Alema) joining the militant group ISIS has resulted in a national debate on how to strengthen governmental religious leaders cooperation across Ghana and whether the nation needs to improve capacities for intelligence sharing (Citi 97.3 fm, 2015). But this is only one side of the issue. What is missing from the debate is a better understanding of how prevention works and why we need it. In this paper the researchers look at some of the models that were developed to prevent terrorism and violent extremism among Ghanaian Muslim youth.

There are quite a number of Ghanaian Muslim youth who are believed to be fighting on behalf of Islamist groups in the region, a senior national security officer in Ghana has long been warning of the threat they posed if they return from Syria, Libya or Iraq (Kwawukume, 2015).

According to the World Bank, 48% of Ghanaian youth are jobless. In its report, the World Bank revealed that the Ghanaian youth between fifteen (15) to twenty-four (24) years do not have jobs (Alotey & Opoku, 2016). Majority of these young men are from the Muslim community in Ghana. Even though in Ghana many Muslim youth use the world-wide web for research, learning, social networking and to just pass time, the most religious youth among Muslims, use the internet to access more information about the militant groups. Security experts believe that the militants reach the youth through internet. In recent time, debate around radicalization has risen, which is complicated by different concepts and processes that intersect and overlap each other. The freedom of movement in Ghana is also a factor for easy Muslim youth recruitment by the agents of the militant groups. While terrorist groups were increasingly recruiting young people into their ranks, there is the need for authorities to be at the heart of efforts to counter violent extremism and promote peace. Young people around the world bore the brunt of violent extremism; they lacked a seat at the negotiating table when issues of international peace and security are discussed (Mpoke-Bigg, 2015).

Religious people are not supposed to be predators that use the young people to fulfill their individual interests, but in these days, it seems like religious people are creating wars and brainwashing youth; at least in the peoples' eyes. Religion is being manipulated as same as youth being misused. It is the people who are using the name of the religion to push their political agenda to wage wars and to instigate hatred among people and not that of the religion (Ibrahim, 2010).

On July 18, 2008, the Parliament of Ghana passed an anti-terrorism bill into law. According to news reports, the aim of the new legislation is "to suppress and detect acts of terrorism, prevent the territory, resources and financial services of the country from being used to commit terrorism acts and to protect the rights of the people in the country to live in peace, freedom and security" (myjoyonline,2008).

CHALLENGES

Adusei (2014) believes that one of the major challenges confronting Muslims in Africa today is how to tame or reverse the tide of terrorism sweeping across the continent. There is a strong belief among policymakers that terrorism in Africa is largely the product of economic hardship, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, corruption, alienation and economic, social and political marginalization and dispossession of the masses.

Violent extremism remains as a recognized main challenge of Ghanaian Muslim youth in this time. Many Ghanaian Muslim youth face difficult challenges towards extremism and radicalization (Mpoke-Bigg, 2015). Adusei (2014) believes that, the high unemployment rate among Muslim youth could be the main factor for them to engage and adopting extremists' ideologies, hence young Ghanaian Muslims are very vulnerable and easy target for terrorists .

Munir (2015) has attributed the cause of youth terrorism to three (3) reasons:

- **Sectarian divisions**
To prevent Muslim youth from terrorism, the phenomenon of the fight among Muslim leaders in the world must be put to an end. Muslims must unite and halt the sectarian violence within Islam. The divisions through internal strife among Muslims have caused fueling conflicts which paved the way for terrorism.
- **Normalized violence**
Direct exposure to sectarian violence within Islam has not only resulted in homegrown terrorism in certain parts of the world, but it has also normalized violence.
- **Social and religious networks**
The availability and affordability of internet in Ghana has contributed immensely to the challenges among Muslim youth in defending their doctrine through social and religious net-works.

THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN ISLAM

Islam recognized the role of youth and regards it as an important period in the entire life of the human-being. It is the time which opinions, habits and beliefs are formed. This period is so important for the personal development than any time throughout the life time of the individual. Youth is the most vital stage of life, worthy to make the best use of it and to strive toward excellence. Youngsters are full of energy and vivid passions. Their road is paved with hope, persistence and enlightened thinking. Indeed, it is the period of beneficial production for generations to come. Muslim youth must be aware of the essential importance and value of their life, direct it to the right way in order to achieve the best outcome. Islam takes very special care of the youth, and urges youngsters to make the best use of this valuable period of their life. Every Muslim shall be asked by Almighty Allah about his or her life in the Hereafter, but the period of youth has a special reckoning of Allah. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:"The son of Adam will not pass away from Allah until he is asked about five things: how he lived his life, and how he utilized his youth, with what means did he earn his wealth, how did he spend his money, and what did he do with his knowledge" (Narrated by Imam Tirmizi). Islam emphasizes the merits of young people developing knowledge and understanding of Allah's guidance, adhering to His commands and aspiring to be the best, by performing good acts. Young people have the physical and mental abilities for being mindful of Allah in all aspects of life. As human beings get older, they start losing the enthusiasm and the power of their good old years (Islam and Youth, 2011). Islam placed youth in high level; youth are considered light and peak of the society. Allah emphasized many times in the Quran, so is the prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Nearly all the prophets were youth and those who believed, supported and stood by them were youth as well. For example, people who believed Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) at the first stage of the revelation were youth. Few examples of them were, mus'ab bin 'Umair, Ali bin Abi Talib, Usama bin Zaid, Asma, and 'Aisha bint AbiBakr. They basically sacrificed their entire lives, properties, and

energies for Islam and Muslims. The Prophet was fully mindful of the potential of the youth. With his incredible foresight, he utilized and empowered the youth in his community. They were taught how to be real men and real women and indeed their greatness was visible through the extraordinary contributions they had left behind (Ahmed, 2016).

According to Hamid (2003), Zayd ibn Thabit was among the generation of youth who were empowered by the Prophet. The Prophet (S.A.W) saw that Zayd had a sharp intellect and an unwavering thirst for knowledge. Hence, he empowered him through scholarship. He instructed, Zayd, to learn Hebrew. Through the guidance of the prophet, the youth in his never involved in any radicalization act. Once, a certain man urinated in the premises of the Prophet's mosque; the youth among those sitting with the Prophet Muhammad at that moment went to beat the man, but the prophet advised them to leave him, and they should know that, they were sent to mankind to be merciful not radicals. Truly, the youth at the Prophet Muhammad era were very merciful to mankind.

Allah said, *"Allah is He Who created you in (a state of) weakness, then gave you strength after weakness, then after strength gave (you) weakness and grey hair. He creates what He wills. And it is He Who is the All-knowing, the All-powerful"* (30:54). The Prophet also said, *"Take benefit from five before five: your youth before your old age; your health before your sickness; your wealth before your poverty; your free-time before your preoccupation; and your life before your death."*

Any youth can be an effective leader when they are provided four things; first is education both Islamic and academia; second is guide and role model; third is involvements; and fourth is affiliation. Education is a cornerstone of our lives; it provides its person stabilities in all spiritual, financial, social status, freedom, security, direction and goals. Therefore, it is the first step of good life in this world and after. Guide and role model bring reassurance, confidence of one's work, motivate, and encourage him or her to do more and proceed further, because life would be impossible without guidance (Ibrahim, 2010).

PREVENTING MUSLIM YOUTH FROM TERRORISM

Activities of militant groups in the West African region have claimed the lives of many innocent people in mosques, hotels, police stations and market places. This act is enough to put fear and panic in the people of Ghana. There is the need to put this shameful act to an end especially among Muslim youth (Abdulai, 2015). As young Ghanaian Muslim fall victim to militant groups like Boko Haram and ISIS, millions of cedis have been spent on prevention programs. There are also many anti-radicalization efforts within the Muslim community, including groups and individuals reaching out to alienate and troubled Muslim youth.

To successfully prevent Muslim youth from terrorism, Ghana Muslim leaders and the state authorities must ramp up efforts to prevent more Ghanaian Muslim youngsters from being lured into terrorism as a result of extremist's propaganda, the effort to prevent young Muslims from terrorism must be on two levels, adding to what the state has been doing to curb the situation.

LEVEL ONE: The task of the state which should involve the following measures:

TRANQUILITY CAMPAIGN

This campaign was established by Saudi Arabian authorities in their effort to curb extremism among the youth who sympathize with militant group through internet. The Internet has become the main battleground in the struggle against al-Qaeda ideology. The ISIS, which is very active in social media, attracts the young people, both literate and semi literate, from developed as well as underdeveloped countries. Both male and female youth leave their homelands to join this terror outfit. ISIS, a terror organization that has no shortage of money,

claims that it has already lured thousands of fighters and sympathizers from all over the world and they are ready to fight for establishment of an Islamic Caliphate (Verma, 2015).

To prevent Muslim youth from adopting ISIS ideologies, the Saudi government has endorsed an independent project called the Tranquility (al-Sakinah) Campaign, which was initiated four years ago by a small group of volunteers. It has since grown to more than sixty-six (66) volunteers, including eleven (11) women, composed of religious and academic scholars, psychiatrists, sociologists and other specialists equipped with Internet skills. The volunteers visit extremists' websites, chat rooms and forums to engage in online dialogue in order to curb the spread of radicalization and recruitment over the Internet. The campaign consists of several specialized sections. The Scientific Section is composed of religious and academic scholars, psychiatrists and sociologists who engage in dialogue with extremists. The Psycho-Social Section is composed of psychiatrists and sociologists who study the psychological and social dimensions of the fanatical and extremist groups. This section also provides advice to families and individuals who suffer from the problem of extremism or ideological deviation. The Monitoring Section monitors all Internet forums, websites, chatrooms and other materials circulated over the Internet. The Publishing Section is responsible for the dissemination of fatwas, opinions, advice and tapes in locations such as Internet forums, chat rooms and electronic news groups. There are other sections, including the Design Section, the Service-Site Section, the Public-Relations Section and the Supervision and Planning Section. This campaign if implemented in Ghana will help curb the phenomenon of youth radicalization in the country (Ansary, 2008).

APPLYING SECURITY AND SURVEILLANCE POLICY

The second task for the government in preventing Ghanaian Muslim youth from terrorism is the security vigilance against the terrorists, so:

- The government of Ghana should charge the security agencies to take the threat of ISIS and its agents in Ghana at utmost concern, and figure out some measures to be taken to deal with their representatives, and launch active counter-terrorism as well as de-radicalization programs.
- Security agencies should also monitor the workers and students returning to Ghana from terror affected areas.
- Ghanaian security agencies should collect the factual data of Ghanaian Muslim youth who have gone abroad to join ISIS or persons who are working for ISIS in Ghana so that remedial measures can be taken.
- Intelligence agencies should also monitor foreign Islamic charitable organizations in Ghana (Verma, 2015).

MONITORING THE ISLAMIC PREACHINGS

Islamic propagation in Ghana has been for a very long time, started by individuals and grown to be at the level of organizations. According to Knoope & Chauzal (2016), growing Sunni support is mobilizing a new generation of worshippers in Ghana. This is based on ballooning economic despair, which provides fertile soil for anti-elite, anti-Western, anti-clergy and anti-elders, etc., narratives. It gives these religious 'players' a symbolic and comparative advantage over the old, existing hierarchies. In Ghana, these same factors pose a more acute risk because of the proximity of the ISIS front and the recruitment activities reported within the country by the national security leader Baba Kamara. Somewhere in October 2006 the National Chief Imam, Shiekh Osman Nuhu Sharabutu warned against the activities of an alien Muslim preacher, who has been preaching disunity and instigating Ghanaian Muslims to take up arms to support fugitive Osama bin Laden (Modern Ghana, 2006).

Salafists are gaining ground in Ghana through night and inter-states preaching; at times they invite other scholars from Togo, Benin, Niger and Nigeria. This action calls for security apparatus

and Muslim religious leaders in Ghana to be vigilant and be monitoring the actions of people involved especially the strangers. Tackling these kind of issues require a great deal of work from the state.

TOTAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE STATE AND MUSLIM LEADERS

In order for the government to succeed in the fight against radicalization and extremism among youth, there should be a total in collaboration between government and the Muslim religious leaders. The state in collaboration with some peace and security institutions in Ghana should organize special training for these leaders. The leaders in their turn after gaining the skills will organize workshops to train local Imams on how to educate the youth to abstain from radicalization. The government must also monitor the affairs of these leaders from time to time.

LEVEL TWO: The role of non-state actors in preventing the Muslim youth from terrorism:

CREATING EMPLOYMENT CHANCES FOR MUSLIM YOUTH IN GHANA

The unemployment crisis is a ticking bomb, security expert Mustapha Abdallah has suggested that the high rate of unemployment in the country could force more youth to join terrorist groups; the state of unemployment in Ghana poses a security threat to the country (myjoyonline, 2015).

Terrorism is a new phenomenon to Ghanaian Muslim youth. Muslims make up an estimated 13%-18% percent of Ghana's population; large Muslim communities can be found in the northern part of the country and few in the coastal areas (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010). Traditionally, Ghana's Muslims are moderate, with the community peacefully seeking participation in politics. Although Ghana is a secular state, it is essentially a Christian country because of the dominant Christian population. However there is no perception that Islam is 'alien', despite the fact that it came to the country before Christianity. The extremist militants exploit sub-standard socioeconomic conditions of the youth, and the government's inability to provide basic services, by positioning themselves as providers of assistance.

ISIS capitalizes on the poor nature of the Muslim youth to lure them into violent extremism and radicalization. According to Mullen (2015), they provide a utopian political project, the so-called caliphate, the centralized Islamic rule, they also provides these deluded young men and women with an adventurous trip as a reward for allegiance. ISIS loyalists receive gifts from Allah including a house with free electricity and water provided to you due to the Khilafah (the caliphate or state) and no rent included. This is more enough to convince any frustrated Muslim youth to join the militants.

To help curb this situation, Muslim leaders in Ghana should collaborate with the various Islamic Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) to formulate policies and create jobs for the young Ghanaian Muslims who are much vulnerable to "ISIS" recruitment. It will be very good if Muslims in Ghana would learn from their Christian counterparts and emulate how they create several chances for the weaker among them.

EDUCATION

One of the strongest steps to prevent extremism among Ghanaian Muslim youth is a long-term educational policy that would support Muslim communities to address the rise of religious extremism in their midst (Sahin, 2016). This, according to Sahin (2016) has been the heart of the problem and the predominance of an indoctrinatory approach to learning and teaching about Islam, and it confines Islamic education to uncritical transmission of a revered set of texts. It is a form of Islamic education that exploited by extremist recruiters in both majority and minority Muslim societies.

Many radicalized Muslims, who join militant groups, have shown to be religiously illiterate. They are attracted by such organizations out of political zeal or a feeling of disenfranchisement in their

personal conflicts and societies. The fight to prevent Ghanaian Muslim youth violent extremism is largely a battle of ideas. Getting religious education right and getting it early is a key to preventing the spread of radical ideologies. Ghanaian Muslims, both young and old, must become better educated about the religion, particularly with regards to war and peace. Muslims in Ghana require modern and contextual understandings of the faith by qualified scholars. This not only helps to build sound knowledge but also a solid Ghanaian Muslim identity. In Ghana, Islamic studies are taught in Madrasa (MAKARANTA) on weekends, government schools under "Islamic education unit", in the mosque and some private institutions (Al Jadda, 2014). The task of Muslim leaders in Ghana is to provide young Muslims with Islamic literacy that integrates reflective thinking skills and intercultural understanding to help them engage intelligently and confidently with their faith heritage and wider society. One can argue that, the kind of inclusive religious education provided in many Ghanaian schools would complement such an approach by enabling students, including young Muslims, to develop a contextual understanding of Islam and its contemporary expressions. Instead of surveillance, Muslim leaders need to encourage collaboration between secular teachers and Muslim educators. This would help pupils to be better informed about Islam and build competence among Muslim students to challenge unbending interpretations of their own religion (Sahin, 2016).

However, parents and guardians must monitor their children regarding what their being taught in the mosques and schools. Because there is no guarantee that those imams or the teachers will not preach extreme ideologies. Ghanaian Muslim youth extremism can be defeated by strong and competent internal Islamic intervention. The struggle against extremism needs to include a measured, long-term educational response where Muslim communities, without being stigmatized, can join wider civil and educational efforts to counter it (Sahin, 2016).

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN COUNTERING EXTREMISM

Young people can have an active role in developing counter-narratives. Experience in youth engagement in the prevention of other anti-social and or risk behavior, such as trafficking, drugs abuse, violence etc. seems to suggest that the youth can play an important role in countering discourse that contributes to extremism and terrorism (OSCE, 2014).

Rushing fresh resources into new areas from where Muslim men have travelled overseas to join ISIS and other jihadi groups (Quinn, 2015).

THE ROLE OF MOSQUES

In Ghana, mosques are found on nearly every street corner, making it a simple matter for Muslims to attend the five daily prayers. The mosque has to be at the heart of all life's positive and constructive activities, so that we raise righteous generations. No mosque should tolerate violent talk. However, in some mosques in Ghana, committees do ignore quite a few harmless extremists, thinking they are extremist but not violent. According to Siddiqui (2016), these are people who are religiously conservative, but do not practice faith in a respectful manner. Rather, they seek to impose their views on other Muslims. This behavior undermines the respect for diversity in understanding and practicing Islam within the Muslim community that has existed since its inception. Our greatest scholars exercised this respect for differences in opinion centuries ago. We of lesser knowledge are obliged to follow their example. But for modern-day extremists, there is only one correct view on Islamic issues ranging from how to pray, to how to dress and eat.

Muslims in the Ghanaian society need to develop a strategic plan because most Muslim community leaders are quite concerned about Muslim youth. However, this concern normally does not translate into a plan. The plan must find answers to how the youth should learn Islam.

How does negative information on the web impact them? What influences them to engage in extremism? What is the impact of war on terrorism on their personalities? How can the community help them? (Siddiqui, 2016).

In line to monitor the activities of some Muslim extremists in the mosque, Siddique (2016) asserted that, the authorities should pass the following resolutions and publicize them.

It is important to clarify some positions for all attendees of mosques:

- The person should clearly state zero tolerance policy toward any type of extremism in the Masjid;
- All teachers, Khateeb, and anyone running a program in the Masjid must sign a policy statement and guidelines;
- There should be a clear statement which articulates the responsibility toward the well-being of the community and the neighbors.

FUTURE CHALLENGES AND CONCLUSION

In general, Ghana as a country enjoys political and social stability, peace and economic development that most citizens do not want to relinquish because they have a stake and interest to keep it going.

The success of preventing radicalization and extremism among Ghanaian Muslim is due to a host of factors. Ghana is a minority Muslim state but majority of its Muslims are moderate, a situation born out of several circumstances and factors. Ghanaians in general are peace-loving people with a culture of tolerance and willingness of helping. Ghanaians are also known to be more religious people but they are not fanatics. Ghanaian Muslims' understanding of Jihad is not translated as armed struggle, but that of a moral struggle (Harun, 2016).

The office of the National Chief Imam, an important pillar of Ghanaian Muslim society has always acted as a pacifier, provider of moral guidance and a symbol of mediation in an adverse situation. As the head of Islam, the Chief Imam has the authority, both at the formal and informal levels, to guide religious activities and orientations.

By any standard, especially in the Muslim world, violence resulting from religious extremism and militancy in Ghana is an exception rather than the rule. Unlike Nigeria which is going through a period of intense terrorist activities, Ghana does not have the dynamics of militancy and political instability that can precipitate upheavals to the country. Ghana's Islamic radicals do not have the strength or the grounds to galvanize the support of the masses (Harun, 2016).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is observed that confrontations between Islamic youth extremist groups and the government in Ghana is an exception rather than the rule. They do not take place on a large scale or nation-wide, but are confined to certain groups with demands ranging from reforms within existing socio-political framework to a regime change by force. The state introduced laws, some of them controversial, to deal with the challenges and threats to its national security. The success of Ghana's de-radicalization program can be attributed to several factors, of which the most important are its societal values. The Ghanaian political system and societal values do not allow religious extremism and militancy. The state and society find consensus on the value of moderation, the understanding of Islam as a religion of peace and the appropriate strategies to deal with contestations coming from extremist groups and individuals (Harun, 2016).

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